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### *Knowledge production in/about conflict and intervention*

Bliesemann de Guevara, Berit; Kostic, Roland

*Published in:*

Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding

*DOI:*

[10.1080/17502977.2017.1287635](https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.1287635)

*Publication date:*

2017

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Bliesemann de Guevara, B., & Kostic, R. (2017). Knowledge production in/about conflict and intervention: finding 'facts', telling 'truth'. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 11(1), 1-20.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.1287635>

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# **Knowledge Production in/about Conflict and Intervention: Finding “Facts”, Telling “Truth”**

Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Roland Kostić

## *Contact details:*

Dr Berit Bliesemann de Guevara

Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University

Penglais, Aberystwyth, SY23 3FE, UK

+44 1970 622852, [beb14@aber.ac.uk](mailto:beb14@aber.ac.uk)

Dr Roland Kostić (corresponding author)

Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University

Uppsala, SE-74520, Sweden

+46 18 4715731, [roland.kostic@valentin.uu.se](mailto:roland.kostic@valentin.uu.se)

## *Short bios:*

Dr Berit Bliesemann de Guevara is a Reader in Peacebuilding, Post-war Reconstruction and Transitional Justice and the Director of the Centre for the International Politics of Knowledge at Aberystwyth University’s Department of International Politics. Her research explores ways and problems of knowing in conflict and intervention politics through projects on transnational think-tanks, knowledge transfers between science, justice and politics, remote and local forms of conflict knowledge, urban legends of intervention, myths in international politics and

politicians' field visits. She has also published extensively on international statebuilding, armed conflicts, and political charisma.

Dr Roland Kostić is an Associate Professor in Peace and Conflict Research and Senior Lecturer in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University. His current research interests include knowledge production in conflict and peacebuilding interventions, diversification and privatisation of knowledge production by think tanks, experts, policy makers and diplomats, and transfer and shaping of intervention knowledge by means of formal and informal networks. His other research interests include transitional justice and reconciliation after mass violence.

[9,972 words, excl. authors' information, abstract and keywords]

# **Knowledge Production in/about Conflict and Intervention: Finding “Facts”, Telling “Truth”**

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## **Abstract**

This article has a twofold aim. First, it discusses the contributions to the scholarly field of conflict knowledge and expertise in this special issue on *Knowledge Production in/about Conflict and Intervention*. Second, it suggests an alternative reading of the issue’s contributions. Starting from the assumption that prevalent ways of knowing are always influenced by wider material and ideological structures at specific times, we trace the influence of contemporary neoliberalism on general knowledge production structures in Western societies, and more specifically in Western academia, before re-reading the special issue’s contributions through this prism. Our main argument is that neoliberalism leaves limited space for independent critical knowledge, thereby negatively affecting what can be known about conflict and intervention. We conclude with some tasks for reflexive scholarship in neoliberal times.

**Keywords:** expertise, neoliberalism, data access, information, authority, legitimacy, narratives, policy, academia.

## **Introduction**

Over the last years, knowledge-focussed explorations of conflicts and interventions have mushroomed. This is evidenced by a steep rise in the number of publications and of research groups and centres that have formed around the topic, contributing to the institutionalization of conflict knowledge/expertise as a field of research.<sup>1</sup> While the surge in conflict and intervention studies focussing on the role of experts and knowledge is relatively recent, however, in the discipline of International Relations (IR) this type of enquiry is not entirely new. Berling and Bueger (2016; based on Bueger 2014) distinguish the role that expertise has played in IR into three ‘generations of research’. While the ‘first generation intends to isolate experts as a distinct type of actor in world politics and aims at studying their causal influence’, the ‘second generation develops a broader understanding of expertise and shifts emphasis to language, rationalities and meanings’. The third generation, finally, focuses ‘on the practices of expertise and how these are situated in various historical situations and material arrangements’.

The three generations of knowledge-related research in IR constitute a useful background for an overview of studies on knowledge and expertise in the field of conflict and intervention. Here, the first generation – studies that isolate experts as distinct actors and explore their influence on policymaking – comprises works, which look into the organisational structure, advocacy work and culture of conflict expert organisations such as think tanks (e.g. McGann and Sabatini 2011; Medvetz 2007, 2012), or which study the influence of academic knowledge on statebuilding practitioners (e.g. Waldman 2014). Yet, works on strategic knowledge production as a central technique in diplomatic counter-insurgency, with their focus on specific actors and their aim to determine the course policymaking in intervention contexts

outside of formal structures, may also be seen as part of such first-generation studies (e.g. Leroux-Martin 2014).

Examples of the second generation of expert/knowledge studies about conflict and intervention – studies revolving around language, rationalities and meaning – are the works of Autesserre (2012), Dunn (2003) and Koddenbrock (2014), who focus on the discourses which constitute the type of international policy problem a conflict-affected country, here: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), is seen to pose and how the images and interpretations of ‘the Congo’ shape international interveners’ actions. Studies focussing on myths as the part of political knowledge that ‘goes without saying’, such as Kühn’s (2016a) and Goetze’s (2016) studies of myth-making about Afghanistan and Afghan warlordism, respectively, also belong to this generation, as do works which try to uncover the hidden/local discourse behind, or paralleling, the dominant ‘public transcripts’ of international peacebuilding interventions (e.g. Heathershaw 2009; Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn 2015).

Third-generation studies in the field of conflict/intervention comprise works that are focused on the epistemic practices of conflict knowledge production and expertise (e.g. Denskus 2014, on peacebuilding conferences and research as ritual), or on the limiting effects that material structures and objects can have on our representations of conflict and intervention, such as Kosmatopoulos’s (2014) study of the effects of the format of the crisis report on representations of violence in Lebanon (see also Smirl 2015; Kühn 2016b). These generations are not clear-cut and many authors’ studies straddle the analytical boundaries erected here. It can be argued, for instance, that Sending’s (2015) work on expert authority in global governance with its basis in the Bourdieusian relational understanding of authority as recognition could be placed at the intersection of the second and third generations. Far from

doing justice to all the interesting works produced over the last years, this brief overview illustrates the wide variety of approaches existing in the field of knowledge/expertise on conflict and intervention, and to which the contributions in this special issue seek to make distinctive, thought-provoking contributions.

All articles assembled here start from an understanding of knowledge as socially constructed and as the result of distinct (discursive and non-discursive) practices. While the authors do not deny the existence of a material conflict and intervention reality ‘out there’, nor that this reality can have substantial effects on ways of knowing (e.g. when access is difficult), they share the epistemological view that this reality can only be accessed through individual and inter-subjective interpretation. Engagement with conflict and intervention spaces is furthermore seen as mostly mediated, adding another filter between the material reality and the beholder. Beyond this shared understanding, and taking the contributions on their own terms, however, each author (team) pushes the boundaries of a specific, different aspect of the broad field of conflict knowledge and expertise studies.

Contributing to second-generation studies, *David Lewis* (2017) argues that the dominant framings of discourse and knowledge in conflict and intervention studies are inadequate to describe the multiple competing conceptualisations of war and peace in today’s international politics. He starts from the observation that both liberal and emancipatory conflict and intervention studies are dominated by Foucauldian or Foucault-inspired approaches, which see power and knowledge as intrinsically linked in hegemonic regimes that dominate all ways of knowing about war and peace at specific times. In contrast, Lewis argues that only approaches accounting for discursive contestation are able to capture the dynamics of international conflict- and violence-related knowledge production with its multiplicity of alternative approaches

to peace-making today. This applies specifically to what he terms authoritarian peacebuilding, that is, illiberal forms of conflict management by authoritarian states. Lewis's contribution thus pushes the boundaries of whose and which practices are counted as peace-making in international politics and research.

More space for nuance and ambiguity is also what *Suda Perera* (2017) calls for in her auto-ethnography of research in the DRC. She argues that research on conflict and intervention needs to account for messiness encountered during fieldwork, but which due to institutional constraints and demands such as methodological rigor and policy relevance often do not make their way into research outputs. By highlighting the oft-encountered impossibility to triangulate information into a coherent picture of 'the situation on the ground', her contribution calls us to avoid the tendency of simplification that has characterised not only mainstream top-down conflict analyses, but also critical bottom-up studies of violent conflict. Rich in empirical detail, Perera's article contributes to critical conflict and intervention studies by showing the need to find ways in which messiness and the type of triangulation of data that raises more questions than it provides answers – or what she calls 'Bermuda triangulation' – can be accounted for in both the research and policymaking processes.

While the contributions by Lewis and Perera focus most on the 'second-generation' questions of creation of meaning, the following two contributions zoom in on the 'third-generation' question of practices employed by different knowledge producers to create authenticity of their knowledge claims. *Julika Bake* and *Michaela Zöhrer* (2017) focus on the techniques used in the production of knowledge expertise in two seemingly very different genres: human rights reporting and comics journalism. Specifically, they analyse representations of field research methodologies



and personifications of truth in the figure of the witness by Human Rights Watch and by comics journalist Joe Sacco. Despite some differences relating to these genres, the authors are able to show how in both cases ‘having been there’ and having access to people involved in abuses is at the heart of claims to authenticity and truth. With its unusual comparison, the contribution not least productively blurs the boundaries of what is considered a genre worth of analysis in conflict knowledge and expertise studies.

In a similar vein, *Berit Bliesemann de Guevara* (2017) argues that politicians’ travel to spaces of conflict and intervention need to be understood as an epistemic practice, which enables claims over authentic insights and knowledge on the basis of ‘having been there’ and forms the basis upon which expert status is ascribed to policymakers by peers and broader public. Bliesemann de Guevara claims that such visits are just one among many performative techniques in a wider struggle over the social construction of roles and problem definitions in democratic politics. By focusing on knowledge-producing practices of policymakers, her study upends conventional notions of who should be considered a knowledge producer in international politics, and it provides inroads to explaining the value attached to located knowledge, which qualifies the general finding that universal knowledge generally trumps located knowledge in intervention contexts.

The last two contributions take a more actor-centred perspective on the strategic side of knowledge production through management of access to the field and the manufacturing of strategic narratives, thereby suggesting new takes on first-generation knowledge/expertise studies. *Jonathan Fisher* (2017) focuses on the bunkerization phenomenon, that is, the tendency by international interveners to remain confined to gated aid compounds, thereby not least severely hampering their

ability to know about the intervened country. Contrary to existing literature, which attributes this tendency to factors such as risk aversion among interveners, Fisher pushes the boundaries of this literature by redirecting the focus to the agency of Southern governments. Using the example of Ethiopia, he shows that Southern states themselves are and have historically been key promoters of bunkerization behaviour and mentality in their interaction with peripheral areas/peoples on their territory. Controlling access to these areas in conflict/intervention is thus as much or more in their interest as in the interveners', leaving the latter little choice in the matter.

In the final contribution, *Roland Kostić* (2017) offers a re-reading of the knowledge produced on the intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time of the government crisis on 2010-11. He employs a diplomatic counter-insurgency lens to highlight the strategic side of knowledge production and policy narratives resorted to by different networks competing over dominance in the intervention process. Kostić's article shows how a focus on informal networks and their strategic production/use of knowledge leads us to different interpretations of external interventions' courses and logics, thereby pushing the boundaries of intervention studies well beyond its liberal core. Yet, the contribution is also wary of interpreting too much power into such informal arrangements: the author shows how diplomatic counterinsurgency is ultimately bound to fail, when strategic narratives and actual practice diverge in incommensurable ways.

### **Knowledge production in neoliberal times**

These valuable original contributions notwithstanding, in the remainder of this

introduction we would like to suggest an alternative reading of this special issue: as a critique of the contemporary conditions of conflict/intervention knowledge production in Western academia and society at large. Policy-relevant knowledge is never produced in a void. Those specialising in it – academics, experts, consultants and similar – are bound by broader dominant structures of their times, both material and ideological (Kaupi 2014). While these structures do not determine what knowledge exactly is being produced, they nonetheless create opportunity structures for, and foreclose alternatives to, certain ways of knowing and accepted bodies of knowledge. What influences policy-relevant knowledge production today, we argue, are the material and ideological practices of neoliberalism.

To understand knowledge production in neoliberal times, we have to take into account the specific historic context of ideas and practices of making Western states surpassingly smaller, more efficient and more business-like, and the effects that this has had on policy knowledge producers. Guiding government policy in the UK and US since the 1980s, neoliberal ideas of new public management and the redesigning and privatisation of state bureaucracies gained global sway in the early 1990s (Monibot 2016; Sussman 2010, 13; Wedel 2009, 29). Their stated objective has been to turn ‘sluggish centralized bureaucracies, their preoccupations with rules and regulations and their hierarchical chains of command’ into governments based on flat hierarchies, decentralized decision-making, productivity-enhancing technologies, quality and customer satisfaction, in response to information rich, knowledge-intensive society and the economy of the 1990s (Osborne 1992, 1; 2007; Osborne and Gaebler 1992). In this process, different aspects of state functions have been privatised allowing for the expansion of global capitalism, while making bureaucracy more informal, multi-layered and diffuse (Sussman 2010; Wedel 2009). The outcome

of neoliberal redesigning has been the state that functions as a network in which all nodes consisting of government and quasi-government entities interact and are equally necessary for the performance of the state's functions in relation to the demands of transnational capital (Castells 2011).

The legitimisation and reproduction of the state are enacted through decentralisation and images of citizens' participation in non-governmental organisations, making them an essential part of the networked state (Carnoy and Castells 2001, 14). At the same time, the privatisation of politics has displaced voluntary citizen engagement with corporate versions, which rely on networks of professional actors that straddle the boundary between business consultants, public opinion pollsters, PR specialists, and lobbyists (Sussman 2010, 16; Wedel 2009; Castells 2011b, 371; Suhonen 2014, 71-87; Shore and Wright 2003, 5). Not surprisingly, the multiplication of policy knowledge producers and experts of all colours is one of the most acknowledged developments in global policymaking over the last two decades (Leander 2014). The multiplication of actors has gone hand in hand with a democratisation of voices in the sense that there are no clear hierarchies of knowledge when it comes to a political issue. Lay persons who happen to be affected by a policy problem may be on par with scientists in the public perception of who is authorised to speak on a matter and whose contribution is judged as legitimate (Leander 2014; Morin and Orsini 2013).

In terms of foreign and security policy, the neoliberal reinvention of the state has meant that the state has reserved the right to use military force, although many aspects of foreign policy as well as military and security tasks, including diplomacy and intelligence, have been subcontracted to private actors (Wedel 2009; Brand 2005; Bliesemann de Guevara 2014; Gentry 2015). In this process, classic roles have

become considerably blurred. For instance, it has been observed that contemporary US diplomats are seen as part-activists, part-lobbyist and part street-smart policy entrepreneurs, who rely on PR tactics such as opinion polls and focus groups to identify shared objectives, project images and build networks in order to ensure peaceful transitions, while reducing the cost of military interventions (Fouts 2006, 22). Some traditional diplomatic and intelligence functions have been outsourced to global think tanks, whose legitimacy is not based on their cooperation with the state, but on their seeming independence and legitimacy as non-governmental organisation and the cultural and social capital of the academics and other professionals working for them (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014; Gentry 2015). Given the ‘flexing nature’ (Kostić 2017) of the activities and identities of individuals straddling the institutional boundaries between state and non-state, public and private, local and global, and academia and consultancy, static categories of ‘policymaker’, ‘diplomat’, ‘consultant’, ‘academic’, ‘think tank expert’, ‘NGO practitioner’, or ‘UN representative’ are hard to maintain and have to be conceptualised in novel, more fluid ways (Kostić 2017; Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić forthcoming).

Informational technological revolution has played a major role in the processes of knowledge productions’ proliferation and democratisation, since it has redefined not only how we communicate but also how we relate to facts and truth in a social reality which is perceived as increasingly complex (Wedel 2009; Monibot 2016; Sussman 2010, 8; Castells 2011a). On the one hand, informational technologies, and especially the Internet and social media, have heightened the transparency of political processes in the sense of public visibility and scrutiny. Access to different types and sources of information from all over the world has become much easier, and so have the abilities and possibilities of individuals to

contribute data (video footage, audio recordings, photos, documents etc.) and to partake in processes of interpreting political problems or situations. In the early hours of immanent crisis, and fuelled by the exigencies of 24-hour news broadcasting, traditional media also have come to rely more strongly on the contributions of citizen journalists, information and images gathered through sources such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram and on live maps based on drone and satellite images, before their correspondents arrive on site – if access is at all possible. All this has diversified expertise and made more inclusive of a wealth of voices.

On the other hand, these processes have put into question the status and value of expertise in society as such. The multiplicity of voices and heightened public scrutiny of political events has led to increased competition over the authority to speak, framings of conflict situations, interpretations of the causes and nature of political problems, and not least policy solutions. This has gone hand in hand with decreasing public trust in what is being presented by traditional institutions and authorities as facts and truth. Information overload, algorithm based selection of news and personal information bubbles are suspected to have led the public to rely more on gut instinct of what feels right, rather than belief in the power of (scientific/expert) facts, a development that Wedel (2009) calls ‘truthiness’ and that more recently has been discussed under the headings ‘post-factual politics’ and ‘post-truth society’ (Fukuyama 2016; Davies 2016). In this environment, which has also been described as a ‘knowledge market’ (Rüb 2006), knowledge-producing actors do not only have to engage in the formulation of convincing narratives about a policy. They also need to engage in struggles over expert authority through self-narratives, performances of expertise and authenticity, practices of branding and, not least, reliance on broader formal and informal networks of experts and policymakers,

through which they try gaining access to and influence on important decisions and elevating their versions of problems and solutions to a status of dominance. Global publics, norms and expectations provide the ideological background against which practices of narrating, branding and networking take place (Sending 2015). To be successful in winning the battles of ideas, knowledge producers have to plug into prevalent global norms, such as human rights or just peace, because such norms provide a globalised blueprint for what is deemed legitimate political action at a given time and in a given setting (Koloma Beck and Werron 2013). In this sense, ways of knowing and resulting bodies of knowledge are always historical and they are deeply political. This is not only true for the non-governmental policy experts advising policymakers, but just as much for conflict and intervention researchers in academia.

### **Conflict/intervention research in neoliberal times**

The neoliberalisation of the state has also affected how universities are run today. Practices of new public management have resulted in a redefinition of the role of universities in society, but also of the relationship between teachers and students (Olssen and Peters 2007). Institutions of higher education are increasingly run as for-profit organisations, in which education is a good that is being sold, academics are the providers of services, and students are consumers with according rights (Lakes and Carter 2011). While this affects countries to different degrees, with the UK and the US as trend-setters, while countries like Sweden and Germany have retained some of their welfare aspects of education, it is nonetheless a general trend across the

whole sector.

Research is also increasingly under pressure to be useful to society to be seen as relevant and justified. In the UK, for instance, the impact agenda is part of the regular monitoring of universities' research output through the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The impact agenda is also pushed by major national research funding bodies. This also applies to Sweden, where bibliometrics are playing a growing role in assigning research grants and ensuring employability. Not least, this has an influence on the publication process of academics. Some high-ranking journals now do not only employ a peer-reviewing process to ensure the highest quality of research; they also weigh the potential to attract views and citations in their decisions to publish a piece. The emphasis by funders and university managements on innovation and new patents in synergy with the private sector furthermore ties academia more strongly to private firms that make the bulk of global economy today (Schottenius 2016).

In the social sciences, too, engagement with 'stakeholders' (such as policymakers) and 'beneficiaries' (such as local Southern communities) is encouraged throughout the whole research process from design to dissemination, again ensuring relevance and possibilities for direct impact. This influences design of research projects and also the types of research methodologies and contents that are currently favoured. Most importantly in recent years, there has been a push towards both evidence-based policymaking and research based on big data, the latter playing a major role in attempts to predict social events such as 'violent conflicts' in the South and 'riots' in the North and, ultimately, to prevent them (Sandvik et al. 2014; Stottlemire and Stottlemire 2013).

The need to make research relevant pushes academics increasingly to adopt



new roles and engage with actors outside of academia such as policymakers and intervention practitioners, but also the media, NGOs, think tanks, consultancies and the like. Yet the impact agenda is not the only reason for this trend. Conflict and intervention researchers are experiencing a reduction of access to their objects of study in several ways. The most noted aspect perhaps is the growing securitisation of research, which is driven by insurance and liability concerns of universities, who prevent their researchers from going to conflict zones (Duffield 2014; Fisher 2017). Other aspects include reduction in funding and time available for field trips and other more time/money-consuming epistemic practices, often justified by funders in terms of value for money. These trends have led to conflict and intervention researchers' increased reliance on information provided by other knowledge producers such as think tanks, consultancies, and local research assistants, or through remote technologies such as the use of mobile phones or Skype to access informants in 'no-go areas'. This puts academics at the centre of knowledge production in neoliberal times and warrants a deeper exploration of, and reflection on, the knowledge practices of a range of actors involved in the provision of knowledge in/about international conflicts and interventions.

### **Re-reading this special issue through a neoliberal lens**

In the following subsections, we present our re-reading of the contributions to this special issue of *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* against the background of the neoliberal developments described above – a re-reading which the authors may not have had in mind when writing their articles and which is entirely our own

interpretation and responsibility. We argue that there are three main themes touched upon by all contributions in one form or another: first, conditions and problems of access to information and data; second, practices generating authority for knowledge producing actors and legitimacy for the knowledge bodies produced by them; and third, struggles over competing narratives concerning political problematisations, interpretations and solutions. While these themes are not new, we argue that what is novel about their current dynamics is the neoliberal push against academia in which academic knowledge production is increasingly governmentalized and mainstreamed along the capitalist requirements for reproduction, in which these tasks have to be negotiated and which conditions the practices, techniques and struggles around policy-relevant conflict and intervention knowledge.

#### *Access to data and information in/about zones of conflict and intervention*

In neoliberal times, the access to research data and information is limited in at least three distinct ways, which concern the research design including methodologies and methods; physical access to ‘the field’; and social access to central formal and informal actors and processes.

In terms of research design, demands of policy relevance and stakeholder involvement, but also dominant narratives about a conflict or intervention that shape policymakers and practitioners’ existent imaginaries, generally predetermine which questions are asked, what is seen as a relevant problem to be worked on or researched into, and which methods and approaches are most useful to do so. How research is presented and disseminated is shaped not by the researchers’ findings or academic agenda, but by exigencies of the policy world.

For instance, in her auto-ethnography of research on conflict in the Eastern DRC, Perera describes how her project was from the start designed with the active involvement of the end-users of her research, namely British policymakers, who often had fixed ideas about the nature of conflict in the DRC, the motives and roles of different actors, and about how the knowledge should be presented to be useful. While stakeholder involvement throughout the project helped to secure research funding in the first place, it also clearly shaped the way the researcher went about designing her study and outreach activities, including the project's central research question. Such consultations with stakeholders' often determine what is seen as a research-worthy, with so-called non-events not even making the political, and thereby politically relevant academic, agenda in neoliberal times (Visoka 2016). Unsurprisingly against this background, studies in other policy areas have suggested, too, that rather than living in an era of evidence-based policymaking, we witness practices and dynamics of 'politically based evidence making' (Nilsson et al. 2008, cited in Straßheim 2013, 71; see also Stubbs 1999; Waldman 2014).

A related form of access limitation concerns methodologies and methods of conflict and intervention research and expertise today. Due to neoliberal demands on both policymakers and academics of efficiency, timeliness, effectiveness, value for money, and societal usefulness, research designs are by tendency biased towards positivist methodologies and simplifying ways of disseminating findings. Messiness, uncertainty, factual discrepancies, and ambiguities are not encouraged as outcomes of policy-relevant research. Rather, they are left unspoken. The same is true for contextualisations and historicisations of conflict and intervention dynamics, which are seen as obstacles to 'scientific' (i.e., easily understandable) data presentation, which can be seamlessly translated into policy recommendations and actions on the

ground. Contextualisations and historicisations seem to belong to the field of academia, but not to the field of politics (in more detail Perera 2017). In this sense, neoliberal thinking subjects the logics of academia increasingly under the logics and permanent urgency of policymaking.

The problem of the prioritisation of specific research designs and methodologies over others, brought about by the neoliberal influences and demands on academia and politics, is further exacerbated by problems of actual physical access to the field, that is, to areas of conflict and, to a lesser extent, intervention (in detail Fisher 2017). To be sure, fieldwork is by no means the only epistemic practice through which conflict and intervention can be known, with analyses of newspapers, Twitter feeds, photographs, satellite imagery and art, or interviews with witnesses and practitioners just being some – equally legitimate – ways of how conflict/intervention and their political representations can be known. Limited physical access to the field is, however, an area in which the neoliberal impact shows most clearly.

The limited and selective physical access to conflict zones today has been discussed extensively in recent literature (e.g. Autesserre 2014; Coles 2007; Collinson and Duffield 2013; Higate and Henry 2009; Smirl 2015). Authors have argued that international peacebuilding and development aid interventions are increasingly securitised, militarised and distant from the surrounding societies, which is expressed both in the physical architecture of the bunkerized aid compound and the specialised equipment of the interveners, and also in their bunkerized mentality towards ‘the locals’. The drivers for the growing militarisation and remoteness of aid and peacebuilding interventions are detected in the merger between development and security as well as an increasing risk aversion in Western societies and international

circles (Kühn 2010; Lobo-Guerrero 2011; Rasmussen 2006).

Yet, as Fisher (2017) and Lewis (2017) show, the observed bunkerization of aid and peacebuilding is not only driven by international forces and rationales. Southern governments use their agency through instruments such as national development plans, military escorts and designated no-go areas to manage foreigners' access to parts of their countries. What at first sight may seem like Western paranoia can in this perspective be re-read as Western impotence. Emulating the same security-development practices used by Western governments, the governments in the South thus act as intermediaries controlling foreign encounters with local realities, thereby having an impact on how international organisations and practitioners experience 'the field', access information and understand their surroundings.

These tendencies of ever-harder access to 'the field' are mirrored in the described trends in academia, where conflict and intervention researchers are under constraints in terms of insurance, funding and time to keep contact with areas in conflict to a minimum or to access them remotely by making use of new informational technologies. This is highlighted, for example, by Perera (2017), when she describes how she had to rely on a range of informants due to lack of access to specific areas in Eastern DRC. Likewise, Bake and Zöhrer (2017) describe how Human Rights Watch had to circumvent the lack of access to 'closed regions' in Syria in their fact-finding about the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian war by assembling a host of other information sources including video footage, satellite images, and witnesses interviewed outside the country.

Interestingly, at the same time that physical access is ever harder to obtain, the pressure to provide novel insights from the field as a form of academics and

experts' self-marketing in an increasingly competitive academic environment has augmented the number of field trips undertaken. In many post-war societies this has led to a 'fieldwork industry', in which 'informants' and 'interview partners' handle a constant influx of researchers of all colours and in which access to the field and to informants and data is commodified (through paying professional travel agencies, fixers, informants etc.) (Bliesemann de Guevara, forthcoming). This raises questions about the kinds of insights that are enabled by such organised, often fleeting and mediated visits to zones of conflict and intervention. The illusion of 'authenticity' and 'access to unfiltered information' that being on the ground creates is geared more towards international and/or domestic audiences than it is towards gathering 'untainted' facts. As Bliesemann de Guevara (2017) argues with regard to politicians' on-site visits in conflict and intervention zones, "authenticity" and "expertise" are socially constructed categories, which rely on preconceived positivist ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of conflict/intervention and about ways of knowing about "reality". The necessity to perform field presence has also been recognised by a variety of NGOs and think tanks. Giving the impression of "being there" is an important part of [knowledge producers] intricate mission to "arrive as close as possible to the truth", as Bake and Zöhrer (2017) cite Human Rights Watch (see also Bliesemann de Guevara 2014). The loss of 'ground truth' lamented by authors such as Duffield (2014) with regard to practitioners is therefore just as true for conflict and intervention experts and researchers.

Yet, field access is not only physical in nature. Kostić (2017) demonstrates how the interpretation of and knowledge about an intervention is crucially shaped by the access (or lack thereof) to influential networks of international interveners and national partners. Zooming in on the Bosnian general elections of 2010 and the

ensuing government formation crisis, he shows that having access to networks of what he calls ‘shadow peacebuilders’, that is, influential agents who operate behind the scenes, allows us to challenge their public narratives about peace and intervention. By uncovering the hidden battles over policy values and directions, the drivers of decision-making appear quite different from, and much more (self-) interested than, the public narratives about liberal peacebuilding (cf. also Kostić 2014; Lewis 2017). For academics and experts alike, the possibility to gain social access to the intimate, partly hidden networks of interveners/peacebuilders depends on a long-term engagement with a country/region and the actors involved in a specific conflict or intervention. While social access does not necessarily presuppose physical (with social media technologies such as LinkedIn, Skype and the like providing useful, non-physical forms of social connection), social access’s precondition of long-term engagement is contrary to the neoliberal trends of short-term involvement and timely value-for-money research. Not being able to get to this deeper level of analysis, however, risks skewing research on interventions: it remains within the dominant public narratives and framings of those researchers and experts set out to study (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić, Forthcoming).

### *Authority and legitimacy in contemporary conflict knowledge production*

In the neoliberal marketplace of ideas, where a high number of actors compete over interpretations of problems and access to policy debates, techniques to augment one’s authority to make knowledge claims about specific crises and interventions is seen as just as crucial as the actual content of knowledge. As the contributions in this special issue show, there are different sources of claims to authority to make truth claims in

the field of conflict and intervention expertise. State agencies such as intelligence services and quasi-governmental agencies as well as in-house experts of international organisations can claim to have ‘insider knowledge’ based on large apparatuses of information gathering and exploitation, but their claims are also tainted by the fact that they are close to, or even part of, the state. NGOs and think tanks, by contrast, make their authority claims based on their alleged independence and objectivity, although these claims may be blurred as these organisations are sometimes state-funded (e.g., the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in Sweden), funded by private capital (e.g., George Soros’s Open Society Foundations) and/or openly side with particular parties or ideologies (e.g., the German political party foundations such as the Green Party’s Heinrich Böll Foundation). NGOs and think tanks differ, however, from professional consultancies, which offer their intellectual services for profit and are certainly closest to the notion of knowledge markets in its narrow sense. Academics, finally, are traditionally seen as autonomous in their production of knowledge, but are also said to inhabit an ivory tower with few links to ‘reality’, therefore barely counting as ‘policy experts’. As discussed above, it is this ivory-tower existence that neoliberal demands are trying to dismantle by pushing academics to integrate into the knowledge market.

While this overview suggests rather static and clear-cut roles of different kind of experts and knowledge-providing organisations, the reality in neoliberal times looks quite different. An increasing number of individuals do not only change jobs in different sectors, the so-called revolving door phenomenon, but actually hold several positions in different sectors at the same time. This allows them to claim different sources of authority in the process of knowledge production. This type of flexian actors who engage in knowledge production in/about conflict and intervention can



claim authority by access to unique information and/or the field, which is often provided either through access to the social networks of actors described above or to the physical information that flexing organisational roles can provide (Kostić 2014, 2017; Wedel 2004, 2009). In addition, in an ever more proliferating knowledge market that is democratised by informational technological revolutions, there are no clear hierarchies of knowledge or knowledge producers, which makes the competition over authority to speak and legitimacy of knowledge all the more important (Leander 2014). Several authors have shown from different theoretical perspectives why an expert-centred view on expertise is therefore not useful to understand the phenomenon of expert authority. Sending (2015) argues convincingly from a Bourdieusian perspective that expert-centred approaches (such as the epistemic community literature) assume actors' authority and its related sources, rather than showing how this authority came into being in a historical process in the first place. From a Science and Technology Studies informed approach, Bueger (2015) puts even more stress on the epistemic practices underlying knowledge production and expert authority, claiming that it is the practices that make the actor (here: the expert) and not the other way around.

Different types of access to information, different epistemic practices, methodologies or ways of knowing, and different self-representations to a domestic or global audience thus provide actors with a range of techniques on which to base their claims to authority to speak and of making legitimate contributions to policy debates. Research methodology is an integral part of the competition among experts and their organisational branding in the market of conflict knowledge. Professional conflict knowledge producers have to show that their interpretations rely on a host of methods to be legitimate. Whether these are based more on natural-scientific or

ethnographic methods, for example, depends on the organisation and its self-image, but also on the political issue at stake and its transformations over time (Bueger 2015). Human Rights Watch, for instance, emphasise their engagement with witnesses of human rights violations. Using witness reports, but also a number of other data sources such as visual imageries to triangulate or corroborate information, their declared aim is to piece together the stories of ‘what has really happened’. As Bake and Zöhrer (2017) argue, HRW’s claims to authority are based on the public performance and clear representation of their scientific methodology, their legal expertise and their moral claim to be speaking on behalf of the victims, which is meant to create a sense of authenticity and professionalism among the audience. The authors compare HRW’s knowledge claims with those of comics journalist Joe Sacco, who pays just as much attention to detail, but allows for doubts about informants in his books. It is the genre belonging to each epistemic practice, that is, the human rights report versus the comics book, that decides on whether ‘doubt’ is an authority-enhancing category. In the case of Sacco, it makes his journalism appear more human, prone to errors. In the case of HRW, doubts are counter-productive as their often forensic-type research has to be ‘beyond doubt’ to be convincing (in detail Bake and Zöhrer 2017).

Several contributions look at the role of field presence or ‘having been there’ as a source of expert authority. In the case of HRW reporting and Sacco’s comics journalism, getting as close as possible to the specific location in which something happened is a crucial part of the performance of their methodology and authority (Bake and Zöhrer 2017). This is also true, however, for academics, as Perera’s (2017) auto-ethnography suggests: her claims to truth are based on an extensive fieldwork in the DRC during which she conducted c.200 interviews with a wide range of actors on

the ground, trying to collect and triangulate information – with all the difficulties and messiness this entails. Unlike HRW, Perera has tried to voice the messiness of data and ambiguity of findings to her audience of stakeholders in policy circles, but as discussed above this was not appreciated. What the international non-governmental organization HRW, comics journalist Sacco and researcher Perera have in common is that their presence in the field is led by methodological choice and the conviction that data needs to be gathered systematically in the field and as close to the action as possible. By contrast, when politicians undertake on-site visits in zones of conflict and intervention, as explored by Bliesemann de Guevara (2017), the fact of ‘having been there’ – ideally several times – is enough in most cases to endow the travelling politician with country expertise among peers and public at home.

The example of parliamentarians’ on-site visits is an important one, as it clearly raises questions about the authenticity of on-the-ground experience and information and about the truth claims made on their basis, since these visits are so obviously staged and superficial. Nonetheless, as an epistemic practice they are a valuable and legitimate source of authority in discourses about conflict/intervention. This suggests that the dominance of certain interpretations and narratives over others is not necessarily a function of finding ‘facts’ or telling ‘truth’, but that there are other logics at play in competitions over interpretations of conflict and intervention.

### *Truth claims as struggles over dominant narratives*

The proliferation of knowledge producing actors and competing explanations about specific conflicts and interventions raises the question of legitimacy of different truth and knowledge claims in the eyes of national and international audiences, especially

policymakers, but also more general publics. There is no such thing as one ‘global public’, but both international and domestic publics are further split into a number of audiences based on ideology, nationality, issues at stake, belonging to professional communities, and many other factors, which makes convincing, legitimate and trusted knowledge claims all the more difficult (Eriksen and Sending 2013). Against this background, questions of why some actors are believed more than others, by whom, and based on what kind of techniques and technologies become essential. A majority of contributions in this special issue converges around the idea that practices of narrating, framing, and truth-telling as story-telling take centre-stage in explanations of why certain interpretations of conflict and intervention come to dominate over others at specific points in time.

Narratives bring discrete and unconnected pieces of data, information or ‘facts’ into a temporal and causal order, which gives them a specific meaning (Ricoeur 1984, preface). This includes the distribution of roles such as hero, villain and victim and the construction of a clear plot, which usually includes a situation, a disruption, and a solution to restore order. Whether an issue is seen as a political problem at all, and what kind of problem it constitutes, are shaped by policy narratives. Setting the beginning of a story can be crucial for how a situation is interpreted and how roles, responsibilities and normative judgments (such as blame, guilt or honour) are assigned (Gadinger et al. 2014; Stone 1989, 2002). For example, Perera (2017) shows how a militia leader can be framed as either a psychopathic barbarian or a ‘Braveheart’-type fighter for the rights of his community, depending on where her informants set the starting point and the emphasis of their story about this person. Narratives are a structuring element of political discourses because they help simplify complicated issues. Nonetheless, the inclusion of detail into narratives

seems to enhance the impression of authenticity – a phenomenon that has been recognised as in danger of leading to ‘ethnographic seduction’ in social anthropology (see Perera 2017). The demands of policy-relevant knowledge tend to lead to a concentration on the here and now, rather than the appreciation of the larger historical context, which again may dilute responsibilities, distort the interpretation of a political issue and thereby prime the policy solutions designed towards it.

Narratives and storytelling are also an integral part of the data collection process – both in the sense of sedimented dominant understandings of a conflict/intervention, but also in the sense of challenging and questioning dominant narratives. Several authors have discussed the role of meta-narratives in different cases in detail. Autesserre (2009, 2012) and Koddenbrock (2014), for instance, both point to ‘resource curse’, ‘rape as a weapon of war’, and ‘corrupt elites’ as the dominant, simplifying narratives that shape policymakers and practitioners’ imaginaries of and intervention in the DRC, and Dunn (2003) shows that these imaginaries have deeper historical roots. In a similar vein, Todorova (2009) and Bakić-Hayden (1995) have traced representations of the Balkans based on Orientalist thinking, which have influenced imaginaries of the Balkan states and peoples and explanations of conflict in the region to the day. This is the simplifying side of framings and narratives that leads to political closure. Experts and academics who buy into pre-established frameworks and narratives will automatically be led by them in the designing of their research and in their methodological approach. On the other hand, as Perera (2017) argues, the multiplicity of narratives and the discrepancies between several stories can serve as an indicator of conditions at present, which shape peoples understandings of their situations and show their agency to construct their own interpretations of conflict and intervention. In this sense, storytelling can be

harnessed for critical research beyond the dominant frames.

Narratives and frames do not only concern the coming-into-being and definition of problems (problematization), but also the definition of policy contents, implementation and goals. Labels such as ‘rule of law’ represent vague storylines (Hajer 2003), which a range of actors relate to discursively and practically, but relying on different, partly incompatible understandings of what constitutes ‘rule of law’ and how it should be implemented in peacebuilding interventions. Such competing understandings and ensuing practices are not problematic as such and can exist next to each other without interference or conflict. In every policy area there is a plurality of voices and stories that claim truth. They can form alliances around shared storylines to enhance their influence, but the competition is usually structured by argumentation in the general struggle over having one’s voice heard in the policymaking process. The most convincing story, which garners most support, or the one with the most convincing promoters (but not the ‘truest’ story) is bound to win and to find its way into policies and programmes.

Yet in specific situations, when something important is at stake for the actors involved, policies and programmes can become the object of more fierce power struggles to impose dominant interpretations and courses of action on others. Kostić (2017) discusses such a battle over dominance with regard to the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He shows how different actor networks involved in the Bosnian peace process produced and used knowledge strategically in a struggle over the future of the international interveners in Bosnia and their impact potential on Bosnian domestic politics. In such a battle, knowledge does not only compete or is being used by different sides to argue against the other, but is actually actively created, manipulated and employed in specific ways and at specific times to gain the upper

hand. This type of knowledge production is best understood in terms of strategic knowledge, knowledge that is produced and used for very specific, non-negotiable aims (Miskimmon et al. 2013; Rosselle et al. 2014).

Strategic knowledge production and battles over narratives cannot only be found among members of the international community in zones of conflict and intervention, but also among Southern governments. Lewis (2017) shows that governments of authoritarian states resort to a range of techniques to shape and control discourses involving their political actions or their countries. These include the production of hegemonic discourses domestically in order to ensure legitimacy of their political power; the control of knowledge production about internal conflict and through representation of alternative voices globally; by controlling the physical access to the conflict area (see also Fisher 2017); and by re-contextualising knowledge in order to fit with competing discourses in the international system, such as the competition between human rights discourse (international law) and terrorism discourse (international security).

While the construction of narratives and storylines based on a range of knowledge claims is a pervasive feature of national and international policymaking, the practices on which they are based range on a continuum from fairly open-ended argumentation and representation of different societal interests to strategic manufacturing to reach non-negotiable aims. Looking ‘behind the scenes’ in order to determine the nature of competition over narrative domination is thus an important but difficult task. The conditions of knowledge production in neoliberal times to a certain extent help uncovering the hidden practices through whistle-blowers and investigative journalists – such as the insights enabled through WikiLeaks, Snowden or the Panama papers. Yet the neoliberal times also make politics more decentralised

and non-transparent than ever, making it more difficult for academics to look behind the curtains of public representations.<sup>2</sup>

### **Conclusion: reclaiming research autonomy in neoliberal times**

Concluding, we offer some reflections of what our discussion means for academic researchers of conflict and intervention and where to go from here. In this article, we argued that neoliberalism has squeezed academic research autonomy in a variety of ways, ranging from demands to produce knowledge that is useful to politics to the structural changes impacting on funding decisions and academic promotions (impact agenda, bibliometrics etc.) and to the increasing limits to physical or social access to ‘the field’. In our view, these are problematic developments increasingly preventing academics from engaging with research questions and methodologies that are located outside of these neoliberal logics.

If our discussion and the analyses presented in the contributions to this special issue have shown one thing, however, it is that scholars of conflict and intervention need to ask more (and more radical) questions about the conditions under which they work and which simultaneously impact on their ‘object of study’, the international politics of conflict and intervention. Highlighting the ways in which the forces of neoliberalism are influencing our field, through direct demands such as the ones regarding the impact agenda and more indirectly through changes in the structural conditions of academic knowledge production, will not enable us to fully reclaim academia from the grasp of these neoliberal forces. Yet, reflexivity, and the forms of critique it enables, promises to keep the struggle for more research autonomy alive.



In order to overcome the vocabulary and frames set by the fields of politics and economics, conflict and intervention research needs to ask more radical questions about the evolving nature and practices of international politics today and about its own entanglement with this reality. With this article, we hope to have made a contribution to the debate and offered some ideas of what questions need to be asked to enable academic research to keep pushing the boundaries and maintain space for autonomy and critique in neoliberal times.

### **Acknowledgements**

The contributions to this special issue were first presented at a conference under the title “Knowledge Production in Conflict and Intervention – the Art of Composing the Picture” at Uppsala University on 1-2 June 2014, financed by the Swedish Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, and at a panel of the International Studies Association Annual Convention 2015 in New Orleans under the title “Battles of Ideas and Narratives: The Production of Knowledge in Conflict and Intervention”. We would like to thank all participants of these events for their engaged discussion and thoughtful critique.

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Examples are the research group “Conflict Expertise: Competing Knowledges – Heterogeneous Experts” convened by Anna Leander and Ole Wæver (Copenhagen Business School), the Economic

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and Social Research Council (ESRC) seminar series “From data to knowledge: understanding peace and conflict from afar” led by Jonathan Fisher (Birmingham University), and the “Centre for the International politics of Knowledge” at Aberystwyth University’s Department of International Politics.

<sup>2</sup> An example of this problem is the debate about foreign powers trying to influence the US elections through hacking and publishing emails of the members of Hillary Clinton’s team (Ashkens 2017).

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